

THE QUEEN FOR A FLY

(The story is based on a historical event that occurred circa 180 BC in Sri Lanka. The Queen, Vihara Maha Devi, wife of the King, Kavan Tissa, was sacrificed for the trivial sin committed by the high priest, drowning a fly in a cauldron of boiling oil. Ironically, in that ancient society that forbade the killing of all creatures, big and small, a woman, a queen no less, was more dispensable than a fly. The other characters in the story are fictional)

By

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(illustrated by Sanjay Amaratunga)

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Long ago, in that fair island shaped like a tear -drop shed by the ever-suffering land above, there was a small kingdom ruled by a young king and queen. The king's name was Tissa, and the queen, revered as a heroine in the island's history, was Devi. In this kingdom lived many important people whose names are lost in antiquity; the few remembered here either contributed to or shared Devi's tragic fate. One of them is her childhood playmate, Menike, later to become her lady-in-waiting and confidante. Menike spent many daytime hours in the palace, but in the evenings she always returned to her cottage by the sea. Menike loved the sea, although she had cause to fear it too. Nine years prior to the events that are about to unfold, her husband drowned in a storm that swept over this kingdom.



“..the storm was raging”

While the storm was ravaging the low-lying areas along the shore, on the leeward side of a hill three miles away, Menike and her daughter, Maya, were safe within the stone-walls of the palace. After several days of raging, the storm

whirled away, leaving behind fragments of houses, broken pots buried in mud and sand, uprooted trees, and shredded branches with rotting carcasses of animals wedged amidst this rubble. The high tide ebbed and, retreating, it left behind a mix of brutal remains on the beach. When Menike came down from the hills in search of her husband, she saw the tide spewing bodies of the drowned on the heartbreaking shore, but her husband's was not among them. The sea brought back fishing boats with rugged men who had harrowing tales to tell; but none knew of her husband's fate. The sea would not give him up, dead or alive. His image floated in her mind: a handsome man she could pick out in a crowd, standing tall among others like a solitary tree amidst the shrubs. The gods had sought him out, she said; having taken him in his prime, their rage however caused, was appeased.

Barely ten years later, another storm was brewing. The terrors of life were again blown into her presence by surging waves and squalling winds. The sky was black with low-swirling gloomy clouds that rapidly spread over the land; the sea, reflecting the fury of the skies above, was dark and somber. Confronted by the impending disaster, Menike spoke thus to her daughter:

“Child, a collusion of fiendish elements
I see in the approaching storm.
Squall-driven waves begotten of storm
Will soon submerge the sagging palms.
How loudly thunder crashes into my splitting ears!
Lightning, like writhing snakes, strikes somber skies,
And disappears beneath frothing seas,



“..lightening like writhing snakes..”

Glowing, for a fleeting moment, two furies:
The black sea below, and the gray sky above.
Such a storm brings fears of gods' intent.
Child, fear its dense content!
Ferocious is its rage, and more fury yet to come.
Mark my words! Long will it wage war on us,
Sinful and arrogant people
Who kill, rape, steal and lie,
And feign compassion for the indigent.
Those waves be the frontal lines
Of the enemy's battalion,
Sent to strike us into oblivion.

'Tis a reproach, my child;
'Tis Gods' way of showing us
They have the power for felling us.
Let us flee!
Drowned before we are, depart!
Says my frightened heart.

The fourteen years of her daughter's life were yet uncontaminated by the horrors that experience begets. Her love of the sea was still that of a child, who runs forth to greet the advancing waves, and her fear of consequences less arousing. A feeling deeper than excitement rose in her heart: a stirring sensation of expectation. Turning her back upon the raging sea, the daughter calmly replied,

“Mother, I think you worry, needlessly.
We have weathered many a storm.
As long as I can remember,
You expressed the same fear,
Each was more furious than the one before.
In them you sensed the gods' deep designs.
We fretted out of our minds.
Superstitious be not mother!
These storms are vagaries of weather
Suffered by the shore-dweller.
The palace, though it be of stone
May not weather a severe storm.
“Temporal creations
Which loom large in our imagination
May be untimely lost.
Transient are all things,” said the High Priest.
Let the waves swell and surge ashore,
And let the winds roar;
But desert I shall not our home.
I wish I the power to calm this storm!
Meanwhile, the mother was re-living in her mind the
tragedy of nine years ago. At that very moment, loud and
threatening, a blast of thunder exploded overhead.

The explosion filled the air, subsided and came back even louder, again and yet again. A violent crash, like that of a massive tree, could be heard in the distance. The landscape outside glowed intermittently from flashes of lightning. She felt herself at the mercy of something savagely brutal. Responding to it, she shouted in a strident voice,

“You will child, when we know why it rages.
To find out, the King must consult his sages.
If all men are proven innocent,
Then gods’ grace and not their wrath shall be spent.
The High Priest, blessed though he be,
Is too old. Perhaps his faculties function improperly.
Some things don’t measure to reason.
From whence this curse, except from heaven?
Before the sea gets wilder and wreck havoc unkind,
Let us flee! No shelter from this storm,
And no screen from the frenzy of these winds
This trembling house provides.
In such a storm, in your father’s time,
We lost his life, and our home.
Is it not enough that we are threatened so,
That you must also flout the wisdom of elders
By contentious discourse and haughty manner?
Contest not my will, child!
To the palace, we shall go.”

The daughter remained adamant. She did not see the fear on the mother’s face within the darkened room; nor hear the terror in the voice amidst the explosion of noise from

wind and waves. Though the house seemed to rock with each blast of thunder, she was emboldened by inexperience. To give the mother a better perspective of nature, she pointed to the trees that were standing tall in the squall and haughtily declared,

“The weak perish and the strong survive!”
Mother, let us stay and fight this storm.
Gods are merciful, compassionate and kind;
They are not vengeful destroyers of mankind.
Not prone to violence are they;
Harm mortals, they will not.
If they did, we wouldn’t call them gods.
He who propagates evil, we call the devil.”

The daughter could not assuage the mother’s fears. In her heart, she felt its roar. Her head told her that a house of timber and stone was too fragile to withstand a steady pounding from wind and rain. In no time, the waves would come surging over its roof and drag it out to sea. She knew that the worst was yet to come. Grabbing the daughter by her arm, she shouted,

“My child, can’t you see
That divine hands hurl bolts of thunder
At lands that ratify not their decrees;
And shafts of lightning are sent
Down in wrath from the gates of heaven?
Let us seek refuge in the palace.
We shall go to Devi, our Queen, for solace
And seek her protection.”

The daughter, standing closer to the window, heard a different command from the wind. It drew her spirit closer to the storm. She placed a restraining hand on the mother's arm as if to steady her shivering body. Their two minds wrestled, amidst gasps of fear issuing from the mouth of the older woman and exhilarating cries of wonder from the younger. Gushed the wonder-stricken daughter,

“Mother, would it not please our sights
The storm to behold; its fury unfold;
And the wind coalesce with rain to bring
More destruction than we've ever seen?
An experience I crave
Is to toss on a ten-foot wave.”

Screamed the mother,

“You are mad, my child;
Too young and unripe to reason,
And overcome with fantasies wild.
If you are at sea in this storm,
Your little life will be snuffed
Out by many agonies.
Eyes you will have none,
For blinded you'll be by the saline debris
Amidst which you'll be twisting and turning
And pleading for help. You'll be screaming,
But your cries will not be heard.
You may reach the crest of a wave,
But you'll have no eyes to see,

Or other senses to feel gods' furies.
Child, flout not my wishes,
For by doing so, you do reason wrong."

A new terrific noise bombarded the fragile thatched roof. A portion of it was torn off and it sailed away in the wind. Now rain was descending upon them in torrents; slashing, cutting, dissecting and pouring into their presence through the hole in the roof and the cracks in the walls. The wind prowling outside the house became even louder. The fire in the hearth flickered and nearly went out. The mother rushed to shelter it with a wooden board. The daughter shrank a little when she sensed that her space was not inviolable or impervious to the wrath of the gods. Suddenly, she sensed the mad exasperation in the mother's voice. She had heard it many times before, and each time her resistance had cracked swiftly in a sudden reversal of emotion. So she said,

"Though you are by superstition swayed,
I, your offspring, to flawed. Reason must bend.
If you insist, mother, our home, we shall abandon.
Seas, drown not our home in thy tears,
But if this be the end,
As you so roughly portend,
Farewell!

Prepared for a long battle, the mother was surprised to see the sudden reversal of direction in the daughter's will. The generation gap that divided them made her feel old and irrational. Why could they not agree on what was right and

wrong from the start, without protracted conflict? The daughter's obstinacy was like her dead husband's. He had hated being thwarted, even occasionally. If she argued with him, he turned a terrible face on her making her tremble and subservient to his will. In a soothing voice that undermined her hard won battle of the minds, she said,

“Here, help me shut this door;
Though no purpose I see in doing so.
The wind will mow it down, as it tore
Away the roof, and felled the trees.”

The daughter readily complied, which made the mother unsure of her judgment. She surveyed the direction the



“..flying debris within a small arc of space..”

daughter pointed to, but there was nothing to see there; no trees, no bushes, no path; not even the hill. Nothing was visible except flying debris within a small arc of space around where they stood. Beyond, clouds and rain were all her eyesight gave of the hill and the intervening plateau; everything was shrouded all the way to the sky. Their flight must be negotiated more by instinct than by sight. She

swallowed hard to take back the fear that sprang in her stomach and rose to her throat. There was not a soul in sight. Said the mother,

“Let’s climb the path that winds among rocks;
Though it inclines steeply
All the way to the top,
Fewer trees in that direction
Than in the other.
Safer it seems, though I fear
The rain flows down the cliffs like streams.”

Seven lofty hills stood in an even line between the sea and the mountainous interior linked one to the other by uneven plateaus clothed in thick forest: the habitat of the elephant, python, the bear and the leopard. There were those who said that the forests were the haunts of the demons and by them only inhabited, while the seven hills having sprung on the footprints of the gods were their abode. On a clear day it almost seemed as if this chain of grassy hills and forested plateaus held up the sky. Only seasoned trackers dared to venture into the forests; others, like Menike, used the winding footpaths that progressed precipitously over the grassy hill slopes. In the blinding storm, the mother and daughter climbed one of the seven hills that stood over the shifting sandy shore, up a footpath that unwound sharply uphill, to seek shelter from the torment that had descended upon them out of the sea. Over crests of rocks and boulders, across little rivulets, where lately there had been none, between bushes that shrouded their path, past critters and birds that shivered in crevices in the rock wall, rushing past torn bushes, flying grass and wind-swept debris; faster

and faster, they ran; and when they could run no more because of fatigue and the treacherous terrain, they began to trudge on fettered feet; the mother always in front, leading a lagging daughter who had suddenly lost her senses,

“Mother, I can barely see and in such pain
From running against rods of rain;
And my feet are too numb to tread.
Such a path you pick, mud-laden and sodden.
Where are you, mother? The incline and run-off
Slow me down.
The bushes seize and detain.
I look up and you are gone!
Where is that scanty bridge
That spanned the cleft in this ridge?”



“..the incline and runoff..”

And the mother replied from afar,

“Dear child, over there, under that dark ledge,
In the cliff’s wall, lies wedged
The timber that was once the bridge.”

We have walked for more than an hour,
And would have reached the palace sooner,
Had not we taken the detours.
The palace we shall enter from the rear,
Here, give me your hand!
My weary weight shall pull you along,
In mind, if we were one.
You must not be lost in gloom.
We are not alone! I feel a presence;
A spirit impels us along
Where ever this trail leads.
Have a little faith, child, I plead!”

The daughter had little faith, overwhelmed as she was by the fierce gust and the rain so penetrating. Wrapped in sheaths of clouds, the hills seemed part of the sky itself until they came within a few feet, and then a faint visibility illumined fearful destruction. A foothold even when firmly wedged into the ground was tenuous. In the mind of the younger woman, who made a practice of stopping an endeavor at the least resistance, there was only a faint hope of ever reaching their destination. At a time like this, the mother did not inspire any confidence; only uneasiness. The mother’s thoughts also dwelt on their helplessness. If only the husband had been alive to guide them through, give each a hand, and utter a word of encouragement, how much easier the ascent would have been! Even in the abode of the gods, she felt she was at the mercy of hideous demons. The daughter was cold and shivering, and in a mood of savage anger. She resolved to remain silent. It was infuriating to be shouting above the noise of the wind and

rain; there was little use in arguing with the mother. Whether she was right or wrong, her initial resistance eventually gave way to compliance. Children were supposed to do as they were told, and remained children for a long, long time. It would not have hurt so much had the mother not being so unreasonable, old-fashioned and superstitious. The mother, confident of the wisdom that age awarded, was unruffled by the daughter's changing moods. In loud chant, she evoked the blessings of the gods to guide them safely to their destination. Looking upwards at the turbulent sky, the mother pleaded as she stumbled along,

“All-seeing and all-knowing gods, rescue us!
Bestow thy mercy upon us!
What grievous sins such cruel punishment deserve?
Have we not expiated our misdemeanors?
Before the dawn of each day,
We offer thee the fragrant sal and na,
And milk pudding and manna dew.
We kill not man or beast;
Neither do we drink, nor engage in wild feast.
Punish, if you must,
The wrongdoers among us.
Let us look upon our streams without apprehension,
Upon our sky and seas without trepidation.
Let birds sing sweetly in wholesome trees;
May their sweet songs float in the breeze!
Let the merry laughter of our children'
Drown the sounds of woe!
Wage not war on us, we are not thy foe.
Pray, lift this curse

Before the storm gets worse!



“there was water everywhere..”

There was water everywhere; water rushed down the rock face, through the bushes and the trees, and over the grass, washing away the debris that lay in its path. Rocks slid down slopes to lower ground. Loose earth flew over their heads. Beneath the layers of earth now melting into mud - flows, was the core of granite that they used in the construction of the palace. They came upon a deserted quarry with pile of granite cut into portable squares ready to be hauled away to building sites. Their cloaks though secured at the waist by a strand of rope, were billowing like the sails of a boat, except that the wind being so fitful and the direction, often contrary, made their ascent more difficult. A wind gust swept the hood from the head of the younger woman, and tore through her hair. In vain she attempted to put it back on her head. The daughter could not walk now without feeling the pain from the gravel and sticks she trod upon. She saw the mother struggling ahead against the wind and rain, her head beneath a well- secured

cloak. She pressed on after the mother because she was inextricably connected, thinking angrily,

“We’ll never get to the palace
We’ll die before we get to the palace”

Eventually, they came to the leeward side of the hill. The rain still fell in torrents, but the thick ceiling of clouds had lifted to a higher elevation. In the lessening mist and cloud cover, below the hill upon which they stood, the friendly valley revealed itself. They could see ahead the familiar trees and landmarks that dotted the palace grounds, all fixed in space and not swept away by tidal wave, flowing water or swirling wind. And when they came to the grove of mara trees whose far-reaching branches were shuddering in wind and rain, they walked more quickly than before. Beyond the grove was the palace. Though steeped in stony gloom, never before had the palace offered more beauty to Menike’s eyes. Seeing it first, to the daughter it might have been the gates of heaven itself; so overcome with joy she was! Forgetting her dismal forebodings and many agonies, she cried out excitedly,

“Mother! There where the crowds
Spread far around in tremulous circles,
I see the palace gate.
Over the swell of wind,
I hear voices of distress.
I hear the thunder of voices,
Desperate for admission,
Shouting, pleading, demanding,

And threatening.
Let us run in that direction.”

The mother was bent on moving along a destined path of mangled brush and shrub, undeterred by its many obstacles. She said in impatient voice,

“No, child, can you not see the crowds up there?
How long would we have to linger,
Before we gain admission through that gate?
There is no room on the palace ground
To take in those who are milling around.
As I said before, we shall go in the rear.
Along the path by the moat, over there.”

She pointed to a little used path leading away from the main gate toward the rear of the palace. The palace, steady in the face of the battering storm, sheltered an assortment of small buildings at its base, the lairs of the watchmen, gardeners and so on; further beyond, there was a village of huts. The palace walls were erected on an outcropping of a huge rock. A long flight of stone steps led up to its main gate, but there were none in the rear. The daughter came to a standstill, the rage at her mother re-surfacing as quickly as it had submerged a moment ago. Bushes closed in on this narrow path, and there were snakes in the undergrowth, people said. And what made the mother’s choice incomprehensible was the distance to the palace from that direction, the steepness of the terrain and the muddy path to negotiate. She did not want more climbing on sodden

ground. Putting her feet firmly into the soft earth, she shouted,

“Mother, that is a steeper path;
The ground is soft and the mud slick.
If the foot slipped or the hand lost its grip
Fall together, you and I, into that moat,
Into the dark hell where crocodiles gloat.
How any worse with the crowds to stay
Than walk to certain death that way?”
After trekking far os wind and rain,
Pray, why risk our lives again?”

The mother knew the path well; as well as the lines in the palm of her hand. Up that incline, behind the palace she walked as familiar as the hill that they had just climbed. For many, many years, she had prodded that way, morning and evening, in sun and rain.

The movement of the older woman was steady, determined and unwavering. She slipped, she fell, and she hurt herself, but she was resolved to lead the way, to make a path if none was there, between the tight bushes, take the pain of doing so and spare more discomfort for her daughter. She shouted back impatiently,

“Be afraid not child,
Here, give me your hand!
Walk like a crab in the sand.
Wedge one foot in the mud
Before bringing the other out.
Mourn not like that weeping cloud!

Dwell your mind on pleasant things,
Like the fragrance of blossoms;
And the joy they bring.
Think of some melodious chant and sweetly sing.
Lift up our melancholy spirits with your song.”

Off she went compelling her unwilling daughter to follow. The daughter surveyed the path ahead. The ground melted from under their feet. Where the water ran deep, it stirred the soil into a thick paste. From time to time, their feet sank into puddles. The daughter felt something rise in her throat: anger. She swore at the mother who brought her out here. To wait outside the palace gate was far better, she thought, than this trek across this treacherous terrain. Tossing her rebellious head to brush off the streaming hair from her eyes, she kicked a branch that lay in her path and shouted,

“How can I sing in so harsh a mood, mother?
So ugly is this weather,
Treacherous is the terrain,
And our ascent retarded by driving rain.
And still more, I am stiff from cold.
Heedless of our woes,
Relentlessly you pursue this fearful course?”

Her response was but the sound of the mother’s feet sloughing ahead. The mother evoked the blessings of the gods to guide the two of them safely to their destination. These melodic chants while holding her spirits up, calming her mind, and pacifying her nerves in the gravest of times, also soothed the daughter’s rebellious spirit and helped to

unify them in a single mission. Above the uproar of wind and rain, the daughter heard again the mother's lament: prayers invoking the help of their many gods; and for the first time, she was in communion with the mother in both body and spirit. She did not want to die after enduring and overcoming greater hazards along the way. Hand-in-hand, mother and daughter crawled up a melting path amidst the shrub, clutching one and then the other.

The only thought that guided the mother was to get her daughter out of harm's way and somehow to the palace. And she did just that.

"I am out of breath!

In the ditch by the moonstone, wash your feet!

O, gods, from whence all these people?

Like mice driven from the harvested field,

They invade our palace; like a swarm of ants

Whose nest is swamped,

They bristle upon its threshold.

Barely standing room there must be inside.

Make way for us! Let us pass!

We are the Queen's servers!

Here you are Raigama! Hurry and open up!

What is with you? You old fool!

Can't you see that we are drenched to the skin?

Open the door and let us in!

The massive wooden door opened and closed behind the two of them, shutting out the noisy crowd festering in the storm. Inside, the stone-walls stood tall and solid over their heads. The daughter dragged herself pasted flagstones, half-walls decorated with murals, and through a small door

into the kitchen. Known and unknown faces came through two doors into the warm kitchen to cluster around the many fires.

Upon seeing Menike and her daughter in their midst, they all fell to greeting them in one voice. There was much joy in their voices, and one louder wished to know why they had tarried. The Queen sent Raigama looking for them, another said. No sooner than his name was mentioned, Raigama appeared in their midst to plead his defense. How could he venture out in weather like this? He would not drive his enemy out on such a day. And who could tell in which direction they would be fleeing in the attempt to escape the storm? He was waiting by the rear door for the rain to let up when he spied Menike and her daughter as they forced their way through the shrieking crowd outside. He opened the door quickly and rescued them. And capping his fingers on his head forehead like a pair of horns, he began to dance around in a circle, a ruse to deflect further criticism. Menike realized that she had not been alone. Her beloved Queen had thought of her. Turning her back on the prancing Raigama she declared,

“What a coward you are!
Howling and biting at empty air.
Call yourself a man when so afraid?
I cannot afford your dull display or wit.
Go elsewhere for better fit!”

Humbled by this chiding, Raigama fled. Never before did this joker surrender to a command so quickly. Removing the cloak from her head, and the rope that tethered it to her

waist, she flung it on a bench behind the door, and spoke sternly to her daughter,

“Cast off your cloak on that bench, child!
You’re in need of rest. Lie down on that bench.
Be mindful of decorum; remember you are a guest,
And affront not those in your midst.”

Having dropped her hood behind the door, the daughter walked about the crowded kitchen, trying first one seat and then another. Unable to keep up with her movements, the mother shouted,

Sit here, by this fire!
Provoke not my ire.
If you do not dry quickly,
Ill you will surely be.
Pray, get in no one’s way
Speak only when spoken to!
Busy they all are
And have no time to heed or care.”

Someone seated by the fire hurriedly got up and made room for Menike’s daughter. Aroused by the commands given with volume that pricked her self-esteem, the daughter whispered in the mother’s ear,

“Mother, go gently!
All save Raigama look fearful to me;
Their virtues only fools would extol.

Not a friendly face among them to behold.
Snap they at each other,
And taunt one another.
Last time, shame I brought you being too aloof;
Now, too brimful with speech, is your reproof.
I shall avoid their company, with no excuse
And suffer in quiet repose.”

The mother, vexed by her ill-humored and thankless daughter, angrily replied,

“Not too quiet, my child, not too quiet!
Speak when spoken to and quiet when not.
Look around and observe who comes and goes.
Listen to the chatter that slips between their lips.
Take careful note and report.
I must now seek our noble Queen,
Beautiful beyond compare,
To tell her that we crossed terrain
Few others would dare.”

The mother shook her head resignedly and left. Kneeling by the hearth, the daughter bent low over the smoldering flames until the rising steam from her wet clothes was hot on her flushed face and her heavy dark hair was nearly singed.

The mother’s declared purpose was interrupted when she spied Podihamy, a good-natured though somewhat garrulous palace maid, a woman of high birth now reduced to poverty by her recklessly extravagant family. Podihamy was always ready to pour out stories of backbiting and

intriguing that went on within the many walls of the palace. Her roving eyes were on the lookout for listeners. The fact that their curiosity was always satisfied tended to attract the palace folk to the stories and yarns she spun. Undisturbed by the clamor in the kitchen, she was gossiping with another by the same door through which Menike and her daughter had just entered. Menike walked quickly across the room with her eyes fixed on Podihamy lest she vanished as suddenly as she had appeared. Now more than ever, Menike wanted to talk to Podihamy for she had been out in the cold while so much had happened inside, as the hushed conversation and whispers in the kitchen made evident. So she called out to Podihamy,

“Strange weather, Podihamy, what say you?
What a day! Many more to come, I say.
Nature laments with fury.
See how bruised my hands and knees
From the many falls upon stones and trees!
What ails us? What tragedy dooms our land?
My mind tells me that this storm be gods’ command.”

Podihamy’s face lit up. Ah, she was about to have the attention and ears of an important person. Abruptly, she turned away from her companion of the moment and advanced to ward Menike. Podihamy replied in a deferential voice that was Menike’s due,

“This storm is like none I’ve seen.
The King too fears that his kingdom
Is cumbered by sinners.

Fearful must those sins be
Which stir gods to such agony.
By Raigama, I am told that
The King and Council will investigate.
Swear they to do what it takes
To secure the affairs of our perilous state.
The seers were summoned.
Let me whisper in your ear
The mindless accusations I hear.
They say the High Priest it was
Who stirred the wrath of our gods!
'Tis his sin that blighted with storm and wind,
The sights and sounds of our resplendent land.”



“..He heeded not the cries of those in pain..”

Podihamy’s whispered tale blasted Menike’s ear,
intensifying in her mind the despair she already felt. It was
the circumstance of being bombarded by so many

aggravating events in so short a time that deepened her despair. By the power of prayer and faith in her gods, she was sustained through incredible ordeals. All of a sudden it seemed as though the prayers to the many gods were unanswered. Now her friend, in a whisper, destroyed the High Priest, who she devoutly worshipped. This destruction, it seemed to her, was far worse than any the coming storm could bring upon her and her beloved land. In uncontrollable passion she cried,

“The High Priest? O, no Podihamy, it cannot be
The seers must not see too clearly.

A saint so pure

That our kingdom is upheld by his sayings;

Our lives made wholesome by his blessings.

The most pious in our kingdom, nay in all four;

None has a higher spiritual score.

He is not a perfidious fake;

He glows like the white lotus

Which bloom in the muddy lake.

Two days ago, his sermon held me.

Every word he uttered touched my heart.

In my thoughts it lingers, never to be lost.

Listened I longer,

Tempted I'd be to renounce this world sooner.

Tore myself away for my daughter's sake.

Renunciation must wait. How her to forsake?

The High Priest is a saint.

Every hour he meditates;

Often times self –levitates;

And on water, he glides.

An enlightened mind can break trusses
Which encumber lesser mortals like us.
Though his body be weakened by age,
Neither by word, thought nor deed would he sin.
His all-embracing love for creatures big and small,
Is that which was declared by the Great One.
Of all virtues, that of compassion
He has brought to most perfection.
In his domain, even a fly is safe.
Far from being its cause,
I'd say he has power to quell this storm.”

Menike looked at Podihamy's face for approval and she saw her eyes aglow in the flames that shot up from the wildly burning fires in the many hearths around the kitchen, but in those eyes she also saw the look of disbelief. Podihamy was unconvinced by Menike's rambling account of the High Priest's saintliness because, being a woman of little faith and religious fervor, she was unwilling to rally to his support. Her visits to the temple were for social rather than religious purpose. She listened to the High Priest's sermons with mild interest that shielded her from gaining much benefit; she was ready to leave the temple before he stopped. She had no proper interest in meditation. Ignoring Menike's defense, she gushed,

“No, Menike, not mistaken am I.
When saints do wrong, gods in sorrow drown.
Sins of lesser mortals may be forgiven,
But for those of our saints, the earth is riven.

When we violate the minor commandments,
They be misdemeanors.
If the gods stir up the ocean to punish us,
Forever will it rage.
But distressed they are bound to be
By the sins of the mighty.
The High Priest sets the moral code that must endure;
If the king tires of it, shall we be secure?
When a priest urinates while standing,
The acolyte will do so while running,
Is the people's saying.
I have it on good authority,
That it was the High Priest who caused this calamity.
The king and his Council will rightly call
Whose blood will appease the gods?
The four seers, who hail from the four directions,
Say the High Priest was heartless.
The High Priest, impossible, you say?
Say then that he was careless.
He heeded not the flapping of its feeble wings.
An Arahat's hearing, been so keen,
Must ring with the cries of those in pain.
Such acute perception of eye and ear
Must blast the sense;
But respond he must to give the gods no offense.”

What wings? What pain? What was Podihamy referring to?
During the long seconds that followed, Menike heard not
the loud voices in the room, only the beating of her heart
that echoed loudly in her ears. To Menike, who believed in
the courage of the High Priest, the force of his morals, and

the power of his saintliness, Podihamy's vague and repulsive tale was blasphemous. To sin by word, thought or deed, was wrong. She had half a notion to shake Podihamy vigorously to make her spill out the whole story coherently without mysterious references to some creature. In growing anger she said,

“Podihamy, tell me quickly!
What did our High Priest do?
What sin did he commit?
Whose wings are you referring to?
Who did he kill?
His crime must be heinous to stir up such anger.
Wings did you say?
Did he kill the falcon?”

Replied Podihamy,

“No Menike, He did not kill the falcon.
Violate though he did the commandment,
“I shall not kill.”
I heard it from a source I would rather not tell.
Yesterday, the High Priest sat stirring a cauldron of hot oil
Over a flame; his mind fixed on higher cause.
A very hot day it was!
The sweet smell of oil brought a swarm of flies
Buzzing before his eyes.
Unimpeded in their flight
Some alighted on him, left and right.
Bothered by the heat and flies,
Gently he fanned himself

To grapple with two evils
Without the will to destroy one,
Must require more serenity of mind
Than even a saint can muster.
The breeze he stirred up with his fan
Disoriented the poor creatures,
Felling one into the cauldron.
The High Priest stirred and stared across space,
While the poor fly was locked in a death defying race.
Its wings vanished, one by one;
And soon it was all gone.
No life is cheap that we cannot create.
Our High Priest's sin was one of callous disregard.
Made he no attempt to rescue that fly,
Without compassion, a heart is but a void.
Can we exist in harmony on this earth
Without, as a complement of our presence,
Love for all its creatures?
Can you or I be called to task for so slight an aberration?
No! Why would gods punish those of lesser occupation?
But heaven cannot let a drowsy Arahat ignore
The pain of creatures entrusted to his care.
Though his eyes be heavy and in years too old,
Show he must compassion for all within his fold.
By gods' will this storm is created,
To avenge their ire
And show their displeasure.
You listen with tearful eyes, Menike,
Your face stricken with sorrow,
But come tomorrow,
You will have no eyes to weep;

Floating we will all be
On a sea contaminated with debris.
The seers warn the King of dire consequences.
If he heeds not, the ocean encroaches upon his kingdom
Drowning it like the fly in that cauldron.
No appeal, they say, against these inflictions.”

What horrible pain it is to hear a tale we do not wish to hear! The greater the pain when the truth is mixed up in a superstition, inextricably bound to it, and irretrievably lost within it. The lie wraps around the truth until it is but a shrinking kernel. Try as she did, Menike could not make the separation. Far easier it was to follow the mind-set of her friend, but without much enthusiasm she said,

“That is behavior unbecoming of an Arahāt.
All our virtues from him do spring.
Do you suppose he was too tired to see that fly?
He is old; perhaps three score years plus ten,
At which the keenest sense is apt to become dense.
With blinding sight as he fades into the night,
Wrong may be seen as right.
His moment’s inattention
Renders us liable to strange penalty.
Methinks ‘tis improper for gods and men
To rage at old age.”
And Podihamy replied,

Argued I, as you now did,
But the seers forbid
The King to such narrow excuse.

They say, that an Arahat's perception
Lie not imprisoned within a decaying body;
Far above they soar, above all impediments.
He hears and sees in his mind
Visions clearer than with ears and eyes.
His and gods' powers are much alike;
He is omniscient and omnipresent.
How repentant must he be!
He is the cause of our misery!
Ere long, all shall perish from this rain.
Was ever a fly glorified into a weapon of such pain?"

How mercurial an effect this observation produced upon poor Menike! Not having the strength of mind to place herself in permanent opposition to the views of her society, suddenly she was consumed by feeling of doubt and disapprobation. She said,

"Don't argue so!
Not extravagant the wrath of the gods.
All life, and many are small,
Is sacred and awe-inspiring;
Each to its specie endearing.
Peace be with all!
Creation is beyond our call.
The gods say, "Dare not destroy and desecrate
That which you cannot create!"
Our High Priest made no effort to save that fly.
Heard he not the cries of that little heart?
Felt he not its pain and sighs?
Without compassion, live we in vain.

Gods of lightning and thunder, wind, and rain!
In the sky's commotions,
We hear thy voice, and feel thy pain.
Behold the sorrow of our frail spirits,
And our fear of a deadly storm!
Our High Priest, too, is stricken by great remorse.
He heard not the beating of wings; his body froze.
Here comes Banda, the court jester,
I wonder what he knows.”

Podihamy swiftly turned around in the opposite direction to grab Banda's attention, but he had words only for Menika that he uttered with utmost pain.

“Go quickly to the Queen.
Don't tarry along the way!
She is in her chambers,
I will accompany to see
That you go as I say.”

Podihamy would not be slighted thus. Till now, she was the center of attention, the source of information, and the narrator of events. She also had the ears of a woman of high standing in the palace, orbiting in a sphere above her head. She was about to lose this connection and must establish new ones with those of lesser consequence. In an effort to preserve her privileged position, she quickly interjected,

“Your tongue is mysterious, Banda;
What be the commotion?”

But Banda had already turned around and was leading a distraught Menike out of the kitchen through a secured door into a long hallway. What she already knew worried Menike, and what she did not know made her afraid. Perhaps the Queen wished to see her in person to ensure that no harm had befallen her and her daughter; but why was Banda so nervous? Quite out of character with the court jester, she thought. She could stand it no longer. The suspense was hurting her. Podihamy had supplied some background, but Banda appeared to know more. Banda was a teaser, a master of reverse psychology. If Menike showed too much interest in her queries, Banda was bound to talk in riddles and keep her guessing. What Menike did not know was that the circumstances being most unusual, nay tragic, Banda was ready to omit the circuitry and go straight to the heart of the matter. To get quick and straight answers, Menike said with as great a show of indifference as she could muster,

“The Queen has not come down to her people
To soothe minds and repair hearts.
Her voice they admire and her patient ear.
Could she be ill? I wonder what ails her?”

And a distraught Banda replied,
“Still worse Menike, still worse!
In great distress she is,
Looking as if she were already dead.
How could the King, her mate,
For whom her love still stirs,

Sweep her into this sorrowful state?
Upon your face I behold the look of devoted love.
In this palace, closer to her, are few.
You may recall the touch of color to her fair cheek.
And what of me? Never will I be able to sneak
Even a little joy; all vanished since she heard the news.
Time after time, I tried assuming many a guise:
Croaked like a frog, strutted like a deer with horn.
But she sits with vacant stare at herself, alone.
Get from her grieving heart one small sigh,
Or from her drooping mouth a cry!
If by this heinous deed the storm we quell,
What use? Neither joy nor peace will
There be in this brooding place.
Having snuffed out our sun,
In darkness we shall dwell.”

Menike knew that the worst news was yet to come. It is better, she thought, not to hear anymore. Better still, to have perished in her home by the sea. Why had she not heeded her daughter’s pleas to stay in their home? They would now be riding on ten-foot waves without the sense to feel the fury of the gods. Exactly what was the tragic story Banda was so reluctant to talk about. He was alluding to some terrible tragedy in which her beloved Queen was engulfed. What did the Queen have to do with the plight of the High Priest and the death of the fly? In a voice sobered by the series of bad news, she asked,

“Why does her heart grieve, Banda?
Is she saddened by our plight?”

Fear she that the gods might
Strike with undeterred hand,
And rain more on our stricken land?
Have the seers told of impending events
That will annihilate our happy state?"

And Banda replied,

"My grief stricken mind
In you resemblances find,
All that I was, wit and foolery,
Will rest forever in my memory.
My mouth cannot speak in eloquence,
For sorrow has wrought its silence;
No tongue to tell of the enforced penance
For a crime of which she is innocent.
No other beauty hers exceeds!
So gentle, poised and gracious.
You, who is customarily loquacious,
Tell me, what sin committed she
To deserve a fate so horrible?"

Upon hearing this, Menike began to weep. Her black eyes
heavy with more unshed tears, she begged,

"Banda, I am afraid of what you insinuate;
The agony in my heart, do not perpetuate.
What crime is she guilty of?
What grievous wrong has she done?
Why confined she to her room?
If she be innocent,

Who dares to punish her?
No! I shall make her go to her
People in their hour of fear and despair;
They have lost their homes and hearts
And are in need of quick repair.”

Banda was silent for a moment. At first his emotions had been mostly sadness for the Queen, but with each passing minute, the sadness grew into hopelessness and pity, and even despair and fear. In the past, even while ridiculing their policies and laughing at their actions, he was able to jest his way into the hearts of the King and his councilors; but is humor conceivable in the face of such a cruel death sentence? How could he dare to jest, so doing, denounce their brutal purpose? And when he at last spoke again, his frustration showed; his voice roared with anger,

“Let the seas swirl over their homes and hearth!
We travelers have arrived with nothing at this port,
And with nothing shall depart.
The Queen cares not for such treasures;
Long despised she worldly pleasures.
Her fear is for their fate.
Remember how your mother took her as her own
When her own died the day she was born?
You grew up together in a blissful dream
In the palace of her father; inseparable like twins;
Two spirits merged into one.
Now, in her room she perishes, silent and alone.
Take her hand and let the blood from
Your veins drain into hers.

Having none of her own, she cannot fare worse.”

The doors and windows were tightly closed to keep out the wind-driven rain; the hallway was pitilessly dark and gloomy. At the farther end, a light flickered, too faint to reach the corners and recesses of the stony interior, making them darker, gloomy and more sinister. Menike had a hopeless feeling that her Queen was about to be sacrificed for some pious purpose. She must get the truth from Banda, distasteful though it was bound to be. Looking irritably at him, she said,

“Brother, your talk is profane,
Like my daughter’s; she too is insane;
Of reason bereft.
Wished she to stay inside and watch
The waves carry our home aloft.
Trade must I one form of lunacy for another?
Is the Queen doomed because she will not dither?
With fools like you, I should not be talking either.
In her silence does her greatness flicker?
Why must I console our Queen
Who at all times is so serene?
Who wrongs her? Tell me soon,
Before I lose my temper
And from your presence be gone.”
And Banda replied,

“If you so insist, I will,
Though I’d rather you didn’t hear from me;
The seers chose the Queen as our offering.

Our beloved Devi is to be sacrificed.
Tomorrow before the break of dawn, placed in a barge,
She will be shoved into the sea to appease its rage.
The King they wooed from her side
With sweet- talk that swelled his pride.
The seers say that it must be done
Or our kingdom sinks in the storm.
Thus settled we our debt with the gods
To terminate the storm they caused.
Mistaken the seers be
To displace responsibility
For so trivial a felony.”

Menike listened quietly to Banda’s story. It seemed to Banda that she was listening to a sermon by the High Priest, so serene and peaceful did her face look. The series of sad events had numbed her capacity to feel. She was past suffering; in her present state she had also lost the power to grieve. Instead, she recalled their happy childhood together in Devi’s father’s palace on the other side of the mountain, and there came to her mind a joyous procession of their common experiences: the face of the kinder King, Devi’s father, the years of play in the palace courtyard, even images of two wanderlust children who escaped from the confines of its stone walls and trailed into the forest. Unafraid of strange demon noises and the cries of animals, they had walked hand-in-hand to the banks of a river so wide that the other side seemed so far away. They were found a day later by a tracker, huddled beneath a bush. How frightening that night had been! They had cried themselves to sleep in each other’s arms. This palace now

seemed like the scary forest in the godless night when they were so far away from those who loved them most. Softly, Menike said,

“The seers are insane!
To outlive our doom, sacrifice our Queen?
What hard crimes convict her?
She did not drown that fly.
And fair is it to offer her in her prime
When the High Priest it was who killed the fly?
In cowardly voice did the King command
This heinous crime to be committed,
And in brutal fashion order its execution.
How could he betray her thus?
His evil mind he thus displayed
By yielding our Queen with full consent.
If offer we must some sacrifice,
Why pray our Queen, beautiful though she is?
If insatiated by beauty, the gods keep storming,
We have lost our Queen for poor cause,
While for the King the gods may be calling.
Ye gods, who dwell so far above,
Distance clouds thy decree.
The more I pray, the lesser thy grace;
Behold with pity my grief-stricken face.
Why gods art thou merciless?
Why vengeful and ruthless?
Wilt thou draw the blood of the innocent?
Quell thy anger and subdue thy might!
Temper that raging sea tonight!
Kill that storm more quickly than it was born,

And deliver my Queen from the edge of doom!

Knowing well that her prayers were in vain, that her words were powerless to reverse the fate of her beloved Queen, and that she was pleading for an impossible cause, she said in an even softer voice, more to herself than to Banda who was beyond listening himself,

“All my life, her shadow I’ve been;
Without her, no form can I assume.
I owe her hours of pleasant company,
Feel for her a love that sustains my life.
We are held together in body as one.
And now, it is her right
To lead me from life to death;
And gladly shall I follow. I cannot let her die alone.
Shall join the procession to her watery grave.
Together we shall enter the barge
And take on the seas’ rage.
She be my comfort and I be hers.
If the sea turns not calm thereafter;
Let it be known,
That the High Priest caused the storm,
And it is he that must atone.
Ah, there she is my beautiful Queen
As in a trance, so noble and so serene!
But she lends not her splendor to dispel the gloom
Of her maids who weep and mourn;
In their midst, she passively sits,
Beyond influencing, alone.”

And pleaded Banda, while tears were flowing so freely
down his cheeks too,

“Menike, let not your sad heart
Be reflected in more tears.
Hither you were brought to console our Queen,
Not torment her with new fears.
I invoked your support to restore her spirit.
Be tender with our Queen; be mild
That she with her fate is reconciled.
Lift up her spirits with soothing tongue.
Speak of days gone by when the palace grounds
Echoed with laughter and song.
Whisper the beauties of the other world
To make it more endearing:
Speak of its joys, its delights,
Make it sound entertaining.
Be a giant tree, and she
Be a creeper around you.
Sing aloud to drown the sobbing;
Shower upon her our blessings.

And Menike replied,

Leave us alone! Fools who reason shed
And those who scare belong in the company of men.
For women, care they little except to enslave;
And when done enslaving, to disown.
Gods, why forever must women sigh?
No joy, but fears; no cheer, but tears.
Alas, that amongst ye gods there be no woman

Our slighted cause to tend;
Thus, injustice will be done.”

Overcome by sorrow and helplessness, she said,

“Send my daughter to me.
Tomorrow, we shall go with our dear Queen,
Into the eye of the storm.
My dearest Queen
At this gorgeous sight
The wild wind taking fright
Will become a gentle breeze.
The storm will cease.
And thou will live on
In memory alone.”



“..I cannot let Her die alone..”

Menike wept aloud upon seeing a panoramic vision of their past: the journey across the mountains in glittering palanquins that brought the royal bridal party to the kingdom of the groom; the festive city and the hearty

cheers of welcoming throngs who lined the streets to catch a glimpse of their future Queen; and the royal wedding that the people of two kingdoms celebrated for a week, creating heaven on earth and the promise of peace and prosperity that would last forever. Now, her life was melting and falling into the palms of her hands as she covered her face to conceal her sorrow and despair from the maids who thronged about her.
